



Maestro of Murray Place

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"A Domestic Guide to a Good Set of Teeth" by Leon Jablonski Platt caught my eye when I was browsing in the reference section of Stirling Central Library. Published in 1862, it contains advice that still sounds sensible today to a lay person. He recommended an annual dental check-up and suggested that teeth should be used only for their intended purpose. The use of a soft brush to clean the teeth twice a day is familiar advice, but the use of plain white soap less so! The author, whose name will be well known to some readers, turned out to have been Stirling's first resident dentist. Douglas Herd, who is a partner in Platt and Common, the practice started by Platt, contributes a more informed review of the volume after this article.

Discovery of the book prompted me to try to find out more about this man who must surely have been a pioneer. This turned out to be easier than might be expected since he left his mark on Stirling in many ways and several people were willing to share the results of their own research. In particular Douglas Herd allowed me borrow "Mr Platt's Diary", covering the years 1865 to 1872, and other documents and letters. The diary includes details of treatments, prices, the names of many patients and a few personal details. I have attempted to draw together other people's findings and to investigate Platt's family history further, checking some of the stories when possible and even finding a possible reason for his choice of career.

Leon Jablonski Platt was born in Edinburgh on February 26, 1840. He attended school in both Edinburgh and France and then trained in Edinburgh as a dentist. He appears to have worked from Edinburgh for a year or so, visiting surrounding towns. In 1861 he advertised a future visit to Stirling, giving his address as Elder Street, Edinburgh. Later that year he moved to Stirling permanently, putting up his plate outside his lodgings in Murray Place. Until then the inhabitants of Stirling had to rely on dentists from Glasgow and Edinburgh who advertised their occasional visits in local newspapers. (On May 9, 1828 Mr Veitch of Edinburgh offered to treat patients at his lodgings or in their own homes.) For a time he continued to supplement local business by visiting neighbouring towns such as Dunfermline and Crieff. By 1865 he was paying a salary to a Mr Barron, perhaps an assistant, and a pittance to someone called David. The diary makes it clear that when he spent five weeks touring the Continent the work of the practice continued.

The Dentists Register of 1881 gives his qualification as Lic. Den. Surg. Royal College of Surgeons Edinburgh, 1879. Presumably he registered then to conform with the Dentists Act of 1878. He was also consultant dental surgeon at Stirling Royal Infirmary.

Platt was a founder member of the Scottish branch of the BDA. He was one of the original 29 who met on June 13, 1882. In 1892 he took on R. Keith Common as an assistant for a salary of £3 10s per week. When Common became a partner in 1895 he had to agree to "devote his whole time and attention to the business of the firm" but

Platt was allowed to work as much or as little as he pleased. Profits and losses were to be shared equally. The partnership agreement contains an inventory of stock in trade, valued at £195 5s 6d and including such items as dental chair, two dental engines, gasometer with face pieces and one gas bottle, hypodermic syringe, vulcaniser, 1896 pin sets, 556 gum sets, 4253 odd pins and many other instruments and materials. Common continued to run the practice in Murray Place after Platt's retirement in 1902. The practice still exists under the name of Platt and Common.

The diary shows a wide range of treatments. Many were simply described as repairs. Stoppings could be amalgam, white or gold with prices ranging from 4s to 8s. A full set of teeth on vulcanite cost anything from £7 to £25. Single teeth were available in dental alloy (7s), silver (10s), palladium (12s) or gold (15s to £1) and gold springs (7s 6d to 10s). Extractions cost around 2s 6d, more if chloroform or nitrous oxide were used. One extraction complicated by necrosis cost £1. A case of haemorrhage is noted and an epileptic fit after extraction. It is not clear whether these relate to the same patient, or if it was a particularly traumatic day. There were a few examples of scaling (8s), cleaning (2s 6d), regulation plate (£1), sealing teeth (8s) and leech (2s to 5s). There were very few consultations without treatment. Some patients were visited and treated at home. The charges varied considerably, perhaps because of personal circumstances, dental or other.

The patients who are mentioned by name include many prominent Stirling families. In 1869 three members of the Drummond family, who were seed merchants and distributed religious tracts, received dental treatment. Mr Stirling of Kippenross, Provost Murrie, Lawrence Pullar, Mr Barty from Dunblane and Provost Keir are other familiar names. There were many army officers ranging from Captain to Major General. Other patients were described more idiosyncratically as Mrs Dirtyface, Mrs Hatchetface, Mrs Steamer and Humphback. It is not clear whether these names were coined by Platt himself or by an assistant or receptionist.

The army connection certainly continued after Platt's retirement. Douglas Herd relates the tale of how at the start of the First World War the soldiers were marched down the hill from the castle to Murray Place, where they waited in the garden. One by one they were taken up to the surgery, any teeth showing signs of decay were extracted under gas, and they were returned to the garden. When the last soldier had recovered they all marched back up the hill to the castle.

The business appears to have been a profitable one. In 1865 the takings were around £340 and by 1871 they had increased to over £700. In 1868 Platt was able to buy the pair of houses in Murray Place where he had lodged, borrowing money from one Amelia Hart (who inherited our house from her father in 1874!). He both lived and worked in one and let out the other. When he retired in 1902 he sold the houses to Keith Common and bought a very large house called The Birches in Victoria Place. Over the years he amassed a large collection of books, paintings (both modern Scottish and foreign), silver, a coat of Persian chain mail, Greek and Roman coins and curios. The inventory of his possessions includes 29 pictures in the dining room alone. The Smith Institute (now the Stirling Museum and Art Gallery) and Stirling Library both benefitted from his will. He died in London in 1914 of pneumonia after an operation to remove a diseased bone from his cheek. The value of the estate was £13,611 8s 8d.

Platt's obituary in the *Stirling Observer* describes him as "a gentleman of cultured tastes and a great lover of art". He never married, attended the Scottish Episcopal Church and was a Conservative. He was a very private man but enjoyed showing his valued possessions and his collection of orchids to like-minded people. In 1871 he was a guest at a banquet in the Guild Hall of Stirling in honour of the marriage of Princess Louise to the Marquis of Lorne. Coming from a musical family he was an able flautist and supported local musical societies. He was a skilled linguist, particularly in French conversation. This was probably a result of the time he spent attending his aunt's school in Paris. He is included in the list of subscribers to "Old Faces, Old Places, Old Stories of Stirling" by William Drysdale, which was published in 1898. He contributed £1s towards the construction of the Wallace Monument in 1865, not the most generous of donations! He is said to have been seen in Stirling around the turn of century on a sleigh pulled by two horses. After retiring he was able to devote more time to enjoying his garden and books and studying numismatics. He presented a very erudite paper on "The First Silver Coinage of Rome" to the Stirling Natural History and Archaeological Society, later published as a book.

The Platt family was, indeed, musical. His father, Edward, was born in Lincoln in 1792. In 1808 he and his brother Henry (who would have been only 12) joined the band of the Second Dragoon Guards. According to a so far unsubstantiated report their father Enoch was bandmaster of the same regiment. The regiment marched to Scotland several times, which is probably how Edward came to meet young Sibella Duncan in Edinburgh. The story was that he liked Edinburgh so well that he decided to stay but perhaps it was young Sibella who was the real attraction. He was discharged from the army in 1821, a year before his brother. In spite of the disapproval of her parents they married in Edinburgh in 1824, a few weeks before Sibella's twentieth birthday. Her subsequent life cannot have been happy: she gave birth to at least 12 children, all but two of whom died in infancy, before dying herself in 1846. Most of the children were given fairly ordinary names but Leon was named after a Polish refugee called Leon Jablonski. Jablonski left Poland in the 1830s with a friend called Jan Bartkowski, perhaps as part of the Great Emigration following the insurrection of 1830-1. He married Edward's sister Sophia in London in 1842 and it appears that Bartkowski married another sister. Edward described himself as a professor of music but at that time the term could be applied to a music teacher. In "Musical Scotland" David Baptie describes Edward as a flautist, composer and didactic writer and thinks highly of his song "My Bonnie, Blithesome Mary". He died in Stirling in 1861 while staying with Leon.

Leon's gravestone in the Holy Rude Churchyard in Stirling has much useful information. As well as confirming details of his parents there is a mention of his uncle Henry Platt of the Royal Academy of Music, London. Investigation of Henry was confusing since many of the standard reference books, including Grove's Dictionary, appear to have attributed many of Henry's details to Edward. (This may have happened because some of the contemporary sources referred simply to "Mr" Platt.) According to a report in the *Illustrated London News* of a benefit concert following the retirement of Mr Platt, Henry showed such early promise as a horn player that he performed before George III and Queen Charlotte at the age of 13. In 1822 he left the army and became a Professor at the Royal Academy of Music. For nearly 25 years he was engaged as principal horn by several of the leading London orchestras. He worked

also with the Royal Italian Opera and performed on many occasions at the Three Choirs Festival.

With such a musical background why did Leon Jablonski Platt decide to become a dentist? Could it have been because his uncle Henry had to retire in 1849 because he had lost all his front teeth as a result of the pressure of playing the horn? As the report in the *Illustrated London News* made clear, this would have been a catastrophe for him since the remuneration, even at the highest level, would not have allowed him to save for the future.

My thanks are due to the many people who provided me with information. The Smith Art Gallery and Museum provided me with an obituary and an article from an unknown source containing many biographical details. Elma Lindsay, Stirling's local history officer who is similarly interested in Platt, shared all her own findings, told me of his gravestone in Stirling's Holy Rude Churchyard and offered much helpful advice and encouragement. Peter Clapham of Stirling Council Archives was able to show me a collection of early advertisements for dental services in Stirling and made the key suggestion that I should contact Douglas Herd. As well as allowing me to make use of the invaluable diary and other documents Douglas Herd related several good anecdotes. Almut Boehme, Head of Music at the National Library of Scotland, was most helpful in suggesting suitable books to investigate the musical careers of Edward and Henry Platt.

Sources

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... Conducted tour of the mouth: 'The Domestic Guide to a Good Set of Teeth' by Leon Jablonski Platt, FRSSA

This book provides a fascinating insight into dentistry in the middle of the nineteenth century. It was written in 1862, a time when there was no local anaesthetic, no stable filling materials, no effective way of properly removing decay from teeth and no understanding of the cause of decay. Mr. Platt takes the reader on a guided tour through the mouth, explaining in the flowery language of the day the importance of teeth for appearance, "*A goodly row of mouth pearls sets off in contrast all the contours of the face.*" Also their importance for speech: "*Without perfect teeth the so*

called dental letters of the alphabet cannot be pronounced with propriety and emphasis." And for function: "A good set of teeth, therefore, and their proper use in mastication are thus the very first conditions requisite to ensure the proper and perfect operation of the stomach upon the food received."

Chapter 2 is perhaps the strangest one in the book. Platt goes to great lengths to emphasise the influence that an overcrowded mouth (i.e. overlapping and squint teeth) can have on the general health of the body. These illnesses range from squinting and deafness to skin diseases and hydrocephalus. Obviously today we find this quite absurd but it must be remembered that this book was written in 1862, when the existence of bacteria as pathogens was unknown and the causes of many illnesses were misunderstood.

In the following chapters he goes on to describe the various diseases of the teeth and gums and his explanations of some of them would almost stand up today. One in particular is called *Odontitis Infantium*, which describes perfectly what we call today primary herpetic gingivo-stomatitis. This is caused by the herpes simplex virus and although Mr. Platt would have been completely unaware of this his remedy is sound: *"A well aired chamber, a cool bed and copious amounts of water."*

However his explanation of the cause of tooth decay is back in the realms of Victorian fantasy: *"If the nutritive fluid passing through the delicate textures of the tooth becomes thick or vitiated, from unhealthy humours in the body, then decay must inevitably be the result."*

Convincing proof of the role of sugar as the cause of tooth decay was not available until the beneficial effect of its absence from the diet of Norwegian children during the Second World War was observed.

The book rounds off with 12 rules for preserving teeth and numerous tinctures and potions for cleaning teeth and combating toothache. Most of these rules would still apply today as they are based on basic dental care. Regular cleaning of teeth, mothers keeping a watchful eye over their children's teeth and attending a dentist at least once a year are all mentioned. There is one rather strange rule, which states that: *"No food or drink to enter the mouth either very much above or below blood heat. The penalty of the neglect of this rule will, sooner or later, be the destruction of the enamel."*

Again we must remember that this book was written 140 years ago.

In conclusion this book makes clear that Mr Platt was a well read and educated gentleman who had an intimate knowledge of his subject in an era when many charlatans simply nailed a brass plate on a door and called themselves a dentist.

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